

## CHAPTER 7

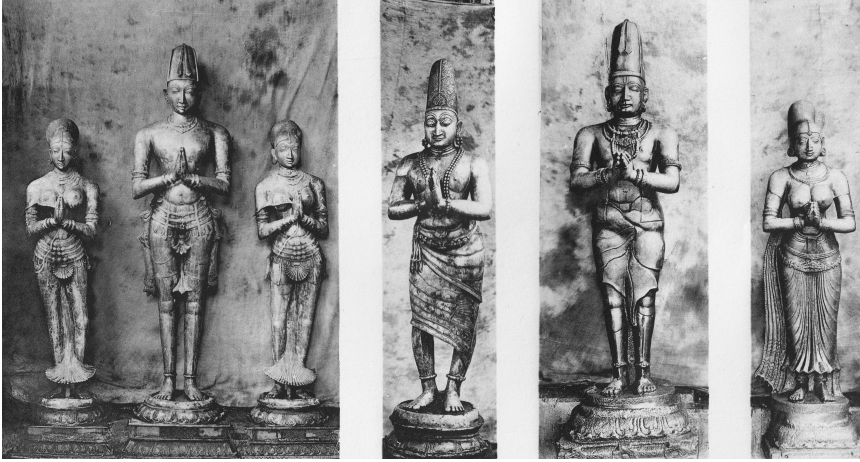
HEROIC RULERS AND DEVOTED  
SERVANTS

## Performing Kingship in the Tamil Temple

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At the victorious conclusion of the war with the Gajapatis of Orissa, the emperor Krishnadevaraya (r. 1509–29) departed from his capital at Vijayanagara to visit many of the most important pilgrimage temples in the far south of India. Arriving at Tirumalai on 2~~nd~~ January 1517 with his two wives, he worshipped Venkateshvara and presented the deity with a necklace and pendant, money to support a weekly bathing festival for the deity and gold worth 30,000 *varahas* in order to gild the temple's main shrine.<sup>1</sup> This was his fifth visit to the temple over the four long years of the war with the Gajapatis in the northeast Deccan. On this occasion, in addition to making these offerings, he 'performed the Sixteen Great Donations there and then had a copper image made of himself, with his hands folded in respect and flanked by his queens Tirumaladevi and Chinnadevi, so that he could always remain standing there in the eastern doorway to attend on his lord'.<sup>2</sup>

The large images of Krishnadevaraya and his two queens still stand within the entrance to the temple, and are joined by a further three sculptures of later royal patrons (Figure 7.1). For 400 years until the early twentieth century, such life-sized sculptures of donors and devotees have been placed in the Hindu temples of southern India. In this chapter the continuity of form, meaning and practice of this genre of portraiture from the early sixteenth to the twentieth century is examined in several contexts, from the large metal images at Tirumalai, the dynastic genealogies of Madurai and Rameshvaram in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to the portraits of Chettiers and



**Figure 7.1** Six portrait images in the Venkateshvara temple, Tirumalai. From left: Krishnadeva with his two queens. Copper alloy, early sixteenth century; Venkatapatideva. Bronze, late sixteenth century; Achyutadeva and queen. Stone, sixteenth century. From *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India for 1911–12*, Calcutta: Government of India, 1915.

Setupatis in the past century. This discussion aims to explore how such Tamil temple imagery served as the means to claim, define and display social and political status.

### Performing Devotion on Venkatam Hill

A stone temple had been established at Tirumalai in the ninth century, receiving sustained patronage in subsequent centuries from largely Tamil devotees. Venkatam hill on which the temple is located has been considered the northern boundary of the Tamil cultural sphere from the early centuries CE. However, the temple's ritual and economic status was transformed from the later fifteenth century during the reign of Saluva Narasimha (r. 1485–92), with donations of land and money by devotees from across south India, including the Kannada and Telugu areas of the Deccan, and not just the Tamil region. This coincided with the wider patronage of Vaishnava temples across southern India within the Vijayanagara empire, especially those dedicated to the deities of Tamil Srivaishnavism, such as Varadaraja at Kanchipuram, Ranganatha on Srirangam island in the river Kaveri and Venkateshvara at Tirumalai.<sup>3</sup>

Krishnadeva visited the temple at least seven times between 1513 and 1524, more than he made to any other temple outside the empire's capital.<sup>4</sup>



Inscriptions on the stone walls of temples record the gifts of money and land endowments left by devotees, including those by royalty. Inscriptions at Tirumalai list Krishnadeva's benefactions to the deity and temple in the three vernacular languages of empire: Tamil, Telugu and Kannada. Prior to his reign inscriptions are almost exclusively in Tamil, and the early sixteenth century is the moment when this temple became of wider south Indian fame rather than a primarily Tamil pilgrimage site.<sup>5</sup> Imperial patronage at the height of the trans-regional Vijayanagara empire by Krishnadeva and his successors can account for Tirumalai's fame to a great degree.<sup>6</sup> Krishnadeva travelled widely on pilgrimage across southern India, visiting many of the most important Vaishnava and Shaiva temples including nearby Srikalahasti and further south to Tiruvannamalai, Chidambaram, Srirangam and Rameshvaram. At some sites he made donations of jewels for the deity or villages and land to support temple rituals for their honour; at others he sponsored the construction of new columned halls (*mandapa*) for the festival display of deities and monumental temple gateways (*gopura*). The widespread epigraphic evidence for his pious donations is joined by a few examples of donor portrait-images. A small stone image identified as the king, his hands in *anjalinudra* before his chest and with a sword under one arm, was placed in a niche within the gateway of the north *gopura* of the Nataraja temple at Chidambaram that was completed following his visit in 1516.<sup>7</sup> A Telugu inscription at Srisailem dated to c. 1530 states that the regional governor Chandrasekharayya set up standing stone images of Krishnadeva, his uncle and father-in-law Demarasa and of himself alongside golden images of Nandishvara and Bhiringishvara in a new *mandapa* before the *garbhagriha* of the god Mallikarjuna; it is not known what happened to these figures.<sup>8</sup> Only in the Venkateshvara temple at Tirumalai did Vijayanagara's greatest king leave large labelled metal portrait sculptures of himself and his two queens as a permanent memorial of his devotion, his presence and his pious donation.<sup>9</sup>

The central image of Krishnadeva stands straight, without any bodily flexion (*samabhanga*), staring forward with eyes wide open and with his hands placed in a gesture of greeting or devotion (*anjalinudra*). His broad-shouldered chest is bare. He wears a short cloth and three jewelled bands around his waist, and further ornaments around his upper arms, wrists and ankles. His body and face are smoothly modelled, his eyes looking straight ahead. On his head he wears a tall *kullayi* with two fillets down the front, an embroidered cloth cap adopted by the Vijayanagara elite from the Persianate world and worn from the late fifteenth century in southern India. An inscription in Telugu on his right shoulder identifies the sculpture as Krishnadeva. His two queens are similarly identified by inscriptions as

Tirumaladevi and Chinnadevi; inscriptions record their own donations to Venkateshvara upon their visits with Krishnadeva in 1513 and 1514.<sup>10</sup>

South India has a tradition of casting bronze images of Hindu deities dating to at least the eighth century. Yet these are very large examples of metal sculpting in the region: Krishnadeva's image is just under life-size at under five feet tall (c. 140 cm). Many similar images of deities from this region's metal-casting workshops are half this size and only a few approach this scale.<sup>11</sup> This may result from the need to maintain the portability of many bronze images of deities, that are carried during festival processions, unlike the portrait-images of Krishnadeva and his queens that remained in place. Images of deities are always cast as a single piece and normally solid- not hollow-cast; only the base or surrounding arched aureole (*prabhavali*) may be cast separately. The scale of these royal images at Tirumalai suggests that they are composed of several sections riveted together. But the similarity with divine images is clear from the standing frontal posture and these may have provided the models for artists to create such donor portraits. Few free-standing metal portrait images are known before the sixteenth century and they remain comparatively unusual even after this date in comparison with the numerous stone images.<sup>12</sup> Krishnadeva is presented as king, donor and devotee of God, with his two smaller queens either side, their weight shifted slightly sideways off the hip in the classic Indian posture of triple-flexion at ankle, waist and neck (*tribhanga*). In a similar manner, images of Vishnu often depict him standing erect with his two consorts, Bhu and Shri, on each side in the same posture as Krishnadeva's queens. The hieratic scaling that depicts the most important images larger is shared between deity and king, for both their consorts are smaller. The similitude of the royal and the divine in sixteenth-century images is further evident in the literature of the period.

In the sixteenth century, the distinction between god and king is largely maintained in contemporary literature, but in the seventeenth century there was a far-reaching conflation of temple and palace, god and king.<sup>13</sup> In some contemporary Telugu literature, Krishnadeva is viewed as an aspect of Vishnu or even as the deity himself. In the *Manucharitra*, a *prabandham*-style *mahakavya* by Krishnadeva's own great court poet Allasani Peddana, the king's heart is described as 'always reaching out to the feet of the Lord of the Venkata Hills' and the king is also described as 'an aspect of Vishnu himself'.<sup>14</sup> Another of the king's court poets, Nandi Timmana, goes further in praising the king as if he was Krishna himself, an avatar of Vishnu, not merely an aspect of the deity. The main theme of Timmana's *Parijatapaharanamu* is Krishna's difficulty in negotiating the permanent tension between his two divine wives Rukmini and Satyabhama, an allegory of Krishnadeva's similar

problems with his two queens. If the king had more than two wives – some have suggested that the Gajapati king's daughter married him at the conclusion of the Kalinga campaign – then only Tirumaladevi and Chinnadevi were sufficiently important to merit making their own gifts to Venkateshvara, as inscriptions record. Or indeed having images of themselves placed alongside their king in perpetuity.

Alongside Krishnadeva in the *pratima* ('likeness') *mandapa* within the outer *gopura* of the temple, are three further sculpted donor portraits, another metal male donor image and a stone king and queen (Figure 7.1 centre and right).<sup>15</sup> Though neither of the stone images are inscribed the male figure is often identified as Krishnadeva's successor, Achyutadevaraya.<sup>16</sup> Though the posture, headwear and iconography are similar, small details of ornament on the image, including the *namam* or *tiruman* (forehead mark) of the 'northern' or Vadakalai branch of the Srivaishnavas under whose control the temple remains, distinguishes it from Krishnadeva's portrait.<sup>17</sup> Achyutadevaraya is known to have been a devotee of Venkateshvara, having been resident at nearby Chandragiri before succeeding his half-brother Krishnadeva in 1529; on this occasion he was anointed king by being bathed in the water poured out of the conch in the hand of Venkateshvara. Achyutadevaraya visited the temple again in January 1533 and December 1535, making offerings and establishing two new festivals;<sup>18</sup> his wife Varadaji made offerings in April 1534.<sup>19</sup> It was during one of these visits, I would suggest, that the images of him and his wife were established in the Venkateshvara temple at Tirumalai. During his reign several temples dedicated to this deity were built at the Vijayanagara capital, including the Tiruvengalanatha temple beneath Malyavanta Hill.<sup>20</sup>

Vijayanagara involvement in temple affairs at Tirumalai and a record of endowments continued under Sadashiva (r. 1542–68), though he only visited the temple twice in person, in February and December 1554.<sup>21</sup> In the period following the disastrous battle of Talikota in 1565 and the subsequent sack of Vijayanagara, the empire's fortunes were at a low ebb with the capital moving southeast to Penukonda. Under Venkatapatideva (r. 1584–1614) there was an expansion of power in the eastern Deccan, reversing some of the gains made by the Qutb Shahis of Golconda, and a new capital was established from 1592 at Chandragiri not far from Tirumalai. Venkatapatideva is often understood to have been a great devotee of Venkateshvara in his temple at Tirumalai near Chandragiri, especially given the issue of coins during his reign with 'Sri Venkatesaya Namah' and an image of the deity on.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, it was during his reign that Vijayanagara grants ceased to conclude with 'Sri Virupaksha', an invocation of the state-deity since 1354, and ended

instead with 'Sri Venkatesha'.<sup>23</sup> The fourth metal portrait image at Tirumalai under discussion has a Telugu inscription on his right shoulder identifying the figure as Venkatapatideva (Figure 7.1 centre). He wears a very tall *kullayi*, a long, beaded necklace, heavy earrings, jewelled belt and patterned cloth covering his legs, and is notably more relaxed in posture with the weight off his right leg. Yet there are few endowments in his name and a declining number by anyone at Tirumalai in the later sixteenth century in comparison with earlier in the century.<sup>24</sup>

All these images are reminders of these royal devotees' patronage and visits to greet the deity and receive *darshana*: the cloth regularly wrapped around these images today is indicative of their continued ritual significance. Inscriptions on the temple's walls record the royal visitors' gifts in perpetuity but are discreet by comparison with these sculptures' prominence. Krishnadeva and his two queens, and Venkatapatideva are identified by inscriptions but such evidence is very rare thereafter until the later nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Standing in *anjalinudra* facing inward towards the main shrine they demonstrate their eternal devotion. When Venkateshvara exits the temple through the outer *gopura* during the frequent festival processions, his metal festival-image (*utsavamurti*) carried on a palanquin or 'vehicle' (*vahana*), these six images are seen to greet the passing deity in close proximity. They share a consistent pattern found with the many near life-size portrait sculptures found in Tamil temples in the subsequent centuries: they are to be seen in the presence of a deity with which they interact. Portrait images such as these are located primarily in corridors, in the gateways of *gopuras* and in festival *mandapas*. The common theme is that these are all processional routes or places where deities are normally absent but at certain times crucially present, principally during the regular festivals that increased in both number and scale from the thirteenth century. The donor-portraits greet deities when they are moving or temporarily enthroned during festivals; they are to be seen as seeing, taking *darshana* of the deity. But this is a three-cornered relationship between god, king and devotee. Not only do the god and king greet each other, but the priests, devotees or worshippers see both the king and the deity greeting each other when the two are assembled for a festival. The king, a frequently inaccessible figure in his palace, is given permanent presence in the temple in a life-size representation and in locations there that are widely accessible and visible. At festival periods the king's relationship with the temple's deities is seen by worshippers, a relationship crucial to the welfare of the kingdom.

From the later sixteenth century such life-size portrait sculptures become more widespread across the Tamil region, especially as architectural sculpture

in temples. In common with portraiture in general, these south Indian portrait sculptures engage with both the likeness of the individual and the typical, conventional or ideal. The essentially social and political purpose of these images of heroic rulers from noble lineages qualifies describing them 'state portraits'. In this type of portraiture, 'The primary purpose is not the portrayal of an individual as such, but the evocation through his image of those abstract principles for which he stands.'<sup>26</sup> They embody the ideals of south Indian kings as the gods' greatest devotees, a relationship crucial to the maintenance of *dharma* in a dynamic political era.

### Dynastic Genealogies on Display in Nayaka Madurai

Among the best-known examples of Tamil temple portraiture are the life-size images of Tirumalai Nayaka (r. 1623–59) and his predecessors in Madurai, that line the central aisle of the Pudu Mandapa ('New Hall') on the east side of the huge Minakshi-Sundareshvara temple that lies at the heart of this ancient sacred centre (Figure 7.2). What distinguishes this massive columned hall is the volume of impressive figural sculpture. It is composed of 124 composite columns, 34 of which have two-metre high, three-dimensional figures sculpted from the monolithic column shafts. Among the subjects of these



**Figure 7.2** Genealogical series of Nayaka portrait sculptures with Tirumalai Nayaka in the foreground. Pudu Mandapa, Madurai, c. 1630.

figures, in addition to the portraits, are rearing cavalry, mythical lion-headed *yalis* and Hindu deities. Some of these deities are known across India, but several are linked to local myths of Shiva. In Madurai he is the 'Beautiful Lord' (Sundareshvara) who defeats the Pandyan princess, Tatataikai, marries her in her new form as Minakshi and then saves the city from various calamities.<sup>27</sup> These mythic images are placed adjacent to those along the central aisle with ten portrait groups of life-size kings and their queens. These royal portraits have long fascinated scholars and visitors to Madurai, and rightly so. They are located in the centre of the Pudu Mandapa, each king facing into the central space of this festival hall. Beside each are between one and six attendant queens or other women. All but one of the male portrait figures are approximately life-size; the variation in part is accounted for by the different style and height of their headwear including the tall, straight cloth *kullayi* with a rounded top and a tight-fitting cloth cap that falls to one side, either left or right. All the figures stand barefooted with their hands in *anjalinudra* on bases extending from the column and above ground level. Conspicuous consumption is a theme in the period's courtly literature and the well-fed stomach spilling over the tightened belt of the northeastern image of Tirumalai Nayaka is striking.<sup>28</sup>

In common with other royal portraiture, their elite status is conveyed by the richly detailed depiction of clothing and jewellery, and the small daggers worn on either left or right hip. The detail of the ornament, particularly of textile patterns in delicate relief, is very finely executed. These figures were not wearing plain fabric but embroidered or printed patterned cloths, for which southern India was well-known as a centre of production and export in the sixteenth century and later. The elaborate textile decoration depicts small birds amidst swirling vegetation, a design known from both surviving textile fragments, and mural paintings from this and later periods, suggesting that the sculptors were representing familiar contemporary court textiles. Their elite status is also conveyed by the elaborate and heavy jewellery: earrings, necklaces, heavy belts, bands around the upper arms and wrists, all with inset gems, or perhaps pearls from the southernmost 'Fisheries' coast between Rameshvaram and Tiruchendur, a source of Nayaka income.<sup>29</sup> It is the exquisite sculptural detail of each figure, the varied attendants and subtle variations in the degree of bodily flexion, with the weight shifted across the hips, that all suggest a greater degree of individuation for each of these dynastic portrait images of the rulers of Madurai than many more generic Tamil portrait sculptures.

In addition to the building's patron Tirumalai Nayaka, the remaining nine images of elite figures can be identified as his predecessors back to the first



Nayaka of Madurai, Vishvanatha (r. 1529–64), all with their accompanying queens.<sup>30</sup> The suggested shift in favoured headdress around 1600 from the tall *kullayi* to the rounded tight-fitting cap worn by Tirumalai and his predecessor Muttu Virappa may be a matter of changing fashion. But it also marks a clearer sartorial distinction between the Nayakas of Madurai and their nominal Vijayanagara overlord at a time of growing tension within the fragmenting Vijayanagara empire. For the Aravidu *raya* Venkatapatideva (r. 1586–1614) continued to be depicted wearing the *kullayi*, as is clear from his portrait sculpture alongside the more famous one of Krishnadeva at Tirumalai discussed above (Figure 7.1 centre).

In around 1630, Tirumalai Nayaka wanted his permanent presence to be displayed in a prominent building that was accessible to a wide public audience of all castes.<sup>31</sup> His image was placed alongside both a genealogical series of life-size representations of his predecessors, who established Nayaka rule over southern Tamilnadu in the sixteenth century, and various myths of Shiva as Sundareshvara that were rooted in the local landscape of the city. Though its location on axis with the main east *gopura* suggests it is a corridor into the heart of this great temple, this structure is a festival hall (*utsavamandapa*), built for the temporary residence of Minakshi and Sundareshvara during two of the many temporary festivals in the annual calendar. The series of Nayaka rulers greet the passing deities, held up on the shoulders of their palanquin-bearers, who process around and through this hall before being placed on the temporary throne-platform at the western end during festivals. As discussed above, through the critical exchange of vision, *darshana*, a perpetual connection between sovereign and deity is established and maintained, crucial to the stability and prosperity of the realm. The Nayaka is depicted as the protector, devoted servant and regent of the deities.

Individual figures from both pan-Indian and Madurai site-myths are also depicted in large, two-metre high column sculptures in the Pudu Mandapa. Among these are the warrior-princess Tatataikai (later named Minakshi) with three breasts who upon conquering the universe met her future husband Shiva in the Himalayas. The column depicting their divine marriage, celebrated annually in Madurai, shows the goddess standing alongside Shiva as Sundareshvara; Minakshi's brother Alakar (Vishnu) stands behind her pouring water over the couple's joined hands. The portraits seen in isolation trace the Nayakas' line of descent to the heroic foundation of the dynasty in 1530 a century before, later successors of the ancient Pandys. But the implication is also that they are Pandys themselves, descended from the goddess of the city through her celebrated divine marriage to Sundareshvara and from their son Ugra Pandya. This relationship of the Nayakas with the deities of the

Madurai region is evident throughout the year in the whole sculptural programme of this columned hall, but made most explicit when Minakshi and Sundareshvara are temporarily present in this *mandapa* during a festival. Thus, the Nayakas are not only the successors to the Pandyas but are displayed as if they were the direct descendants of the deities of the city.

The declining authority of the final Aravidu dynasty of Vijayanagara kings was increasingly challenged in the second half of the sixteenth century by the growing power and influence of the Nayakas, former governors and now kings in their own right, whose relationship with Vijayanagara oscillated between subordination and displays of independence. The increasingly tense and ambiguous political relationship between nominal overlord and the supposedly subservient Nayakas was brought to a head in a major civil war in the early seventeenth century. Following the death of Venkatapatideva in 1614, a conflict of succession broke out, that lasted intermittently for over a decade, pitching two Aravidu noble factions against each other in support of rival claimants to the throne. The political, religious and cultural legitimacy of the Nayakas was based on both their relations with the Vijayanagara emperor and the imperial centre, and their association with the cultural traditions of their adopted territory in the Tamil country expressed through their patronage of temples and their deities.

The period from the later sixteenth through the seventeenth centuries saw the weakening of the Nayakas' ties to Vijayanagara as they strengthened their territorial base in the Tamil country, and established closer ties to the deities of this place. This process is apparent in an examination of the material evidence of temple architecture from this period, not only in the volume and scale of construction but in the details, such as the establishment of this visual genealogy in Madurai. This demonstrates that whilst a 'proper' history or inherited status may not be necessary for the foundation of a Nayaka state it was clearly desirable in the very different political and cultural circumstances of the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The Pudu Mandapa's visual genealogy emphasised the Madurai Nayakas' rootedness in the Tamil country as patrons of local, Tamil institutions and one of its important pilgrimage sites, and also the foundation of this new lineage of kings in the more magnificent era of Krishnadeva's reign in the early sixteenth century.

By the 1620s and 1630s the Madurai Nayakas were firmly established in the far south, having substantially rebuilt the Minakshi-Sundareshvara temple at the heart of the city and having sponsored additions to many other temples in the city and the surrounding Madurai region, starting 70 or 80 years previously. Over the course of these decades, the Madurai Nayakas' relationship with the Vijayanagara *raya* had oscillated between displays of loyal subservience and

independence. The construction of the Pudu Mandapa under Tirumalai's patronage, with its gallery of portraits tracing the Nayaka lineage back to the dynasty's celebrated foundation around 1530, is one element in the Madurai Nayakas' emphasis on linking their rule with the past greatness, not the present weakness, of Vijayanagara. Other images of Tirumalai in the region surrounding Madurai – at Alagarkoyil, Tirupparankundram and Tiruppuvanam – and further afield, to the north at Srirangam and to the south at Srivilliputtur (Figure 7.3) and Padmanabhapuram, appear to define the spatial limits of his temple patronage.<sup>32</sup>

The appearance of large-scale and numerous portrait images of Nayaka rulers is a distinctive feature of the temples of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Tamilnadu. Many Tamil portrait sculptures are relatively generic 'state portraits', but not all, as the detail and individuation of the life-size images at Madurai suggest. A portrait may be seen as the materialisation of the donor's patronage and eternal devotion, as a more visible and prominent alternative or addition, to the older and more common inscription recording a gift. But this dynastic genealogy and a few similar examples suggests an additional function, establishing and celebrating the history, lineage and tradition of their Nayaka subjects. The royal ideology projected is of the lineage of Nayakas as heroic rulers and devoted servants of God. This is in clear contrast to the erotic, courtly image of the ruler in his pursuit of *bhoga* (enjoyment) presented in many of the miniature ivories from the period as well as at the palace at Ramnad.<sup>33</sup>

### Portraiture and Pilgrimage to Rameshvaram

The Setupati rulers of Ramnad in the far southeast of the Tamil country were the 'guardians of the Setu', the causeway leading to the sacred conch-shaped island upon which one of the holiest Hindu temples across India is located. The Ramanatha temple on the east side of Rameshvaram island is built around the two *lingas* said to have been consecrated by Rama following his successful defeat of Ravana who had abducted his wife Sita and imprisoned her on Lanka. The temple was a long-established pilgrimage destination, visited by Krishnadevaraya in 1513 on his tour from Tirumalai southwards. In the early seventeenth century, the Madurai Nayakas established the Setupatis as rulers of the southeast coast and guardians of the pilgrimage route to Rameshvaram. From this period the Setupatis began issuing inscriptions of their own and through the seventeenth century established a greater degree of regional autonomy, as their Madurai overlords' power declined and the Nayakas' attention turned northward. The changing political fortunes of the



**Figure 7.3** Tirumalai Nayaka and queen. Vaidyanatha temple, near Srivilliputtur, c. 1630.

Setupatis are evident not only in the shift of their capital from the early coronation site at Pokalur to the elaborately-fortified site at Ramnad ten miles east, but also their increasing patronage of the great temple at Rameshvaram and the celebration of Navaratri ('Nine Nights') in the 1670s. The latter festival was the most important public royal ritual in the Vijayanagara empire and its successor states, focussing on the reigning king and the annual revitalisation of his kingship and his realm.<sup>34</sup> Emerging from beneath the shadow of subservience to the Madurai Nayakas, portraiture was used to declare the Setupatis' new royal status. Portraiture in the temple and palace project the king as heroic ruler and devoted servant of God, as well as a ruler enjoying the pleasures of courtly life.

All these aspects of early modern royal ideology in south India are presented in the wall-paintings of the Ramalinga Vilasam, the largest building within the palace at Ramnad. These paintings date to the early eighteenth century – probably *c.* 1715–25 – shortly after the palace had been established. They constitute the most extensive surviving body of paintings within a south Indian palace before the nineteenth century. On the lower level, a large public or 'exterior' space measuring *c.* 50 by 20 metres and 5 metres in height was used for diplomatic receptions, court gatherings and coronations. Beyond this are two progressively smaller and lower chambers, the innermost room filled with columns and small arches between. Stairs in a corner of this room lead to an upper chamber. The paintings cover the walls of all these rooms and the underside of the arches in the inner lower room.<sup>35</sup>

Among the many paintings of sacred topography, narratives of the *Ramayana* and deities, Muthu Vijaya Raghunatha Setupati (r. 1710–25) is depicted in battle against his Tanjavur rival Sarabhoji I (r. 1711–29) in 1715 with a Tamil label identifying him and his rivals underneath. In another scene, he is shown seated with the royal sceptre (*cenkol*) in his right hand alongside his wife to receive three European – probably Dutch – envoys.<sup>36</sup> In another painting he stands in profile greeting the adjacent labelled image of Vishnu as Trivikrama (Plate 28), a depiction of the ruler as devotee alongside a deity similar to contemporary portrait sculptures. A notable feature is the adoption of a pale green background for identifiable portraits of the Setupati, a convention shared with some other Tamil paintings from this period including those at Nattam, Chidambaram and Avudaiyarkoyil. Such a background for portraits in profile is a Mughal convention of Akbar- and Jahangir-period paintings of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries though less common thereafter, and occasionally found in Deccani paintings of the same period. Such a stylistic convention may have been adopted in early eighteenth century southern India from an earlier Deccani or Mughal source,



as is suggested by the Persianisation of Setupati dress, though we have, as yet, no evidence for the circulation of court paintings on paper as far south as Ramnad. However, Anna Seastrand notes that a green background is a long-standing convention in some south Indian paintings of much earlier date.<sup>37</sup>

Other paintings in the inner rooms of the building declare the royal status of the Setupatis. Among the smaller scenes on the undersides of the arches in the rear of the downstairs hall, Muthu Vijaya Raghunatha is depicted standing to receive the *cenkol* from the Setupatis' tutelary deity Rajarajeshvari ('Goddess of the king of kings') who is seated on a throne. A common feature of many of the Vijayanagara successor states is the importance of a local goddess for whom the rulers act as regent. In Madurai, the Nayakas received their authority to rule from Minakshi, celebrated in an annual event depicted in a ceiling painting similar to this one in the Minakshi-Sundareshwara temple dating to around 1700.<sup>38</sup> In a further scene establishing the foundations for Setupati kingship, Muthu Vijaya Raghunatha is consecrated with gems (*ratna pattabishekam*). The adjacent Tamil inscription declares that this ceremony was performed by Vijaya Ranga Chokkanatha, the Madurai Nayaka (r. 1706–32), and that a further lavish royal consecration ceremony, the *hiranyagarba yajna* ('Golden Womb sacrifice'), had been performed by Muthu Vijaya Raghunatha.<sup>39</sup> In the upstairs chamber the Setupati is repeatedly shown around the walls in scenes of royal courtly pleasure: he eats sumptuous meals, enjoys music and dancing, makes love, and swims with several women in a lotus-filled pond (Figure 7.4). Nayaka kings pursued such sensual enjoyment not for themselves but for the kingdom. For the Setupati moving through the Ramalinga Vilasam and entering this room, in which his image is repeatedly depicted, he would be enveloped in a series of 'reflexive circles' for 'life in the court is a montage of endless self-replication'.<sup>40</sup>

The homology between king and god alluded to in contemporary literature is made explicit with the Setupati depicted as the god of erotic love Kama firing feathered arrows at his female counterpart, the goddess Rati, opposite; both deities are commonly paired in contemporary temple sculpture. In a further royal–divine homology the Setupati is depicted as the adolescent Krishna of the *Bhagavata Purana*, sitting in a tree taunting a group of women below and in another scene plays the flute at the centre of a circular *rasamandala* ring of dancers. The latter is an unusual manifestation of Krishna in southern India and more familiar further north in court paintings from Rajasthan. Contemporary royal portraiture in eighteenth-century Rajasthani painting similarly often shows the ruler enjoying the pleasures of the court. In a like manner, the paintings throughout the Ramalinga Vilasam may be





**Figure 7.4** Muthu Vijaya Raghunatha Setupati swimming with women. Upper chamber, Ramalinga Vilasam, Ramnad Palace, 1720s.

interpreted as depicting the enactment of the ideals of Setupati kingship by Muthu Vijaya Raghunatha in the early eighteenth century.<sup>41</sup>

The Ramanatha temple on Rameshvaram island encompasses a large walled area with tall *gopuras* on the east and west sides; smaller replacements for the unfinished earlier foundations on the north and south sides were completed before the reconsecration ceremony (*mahakumbabishekam*) in early 2016. At the heart of the temple are shrines to Shiva as Ramanatha and his consort, Parvatavardini Amman, within their own walled enclosures. Surrounding these are two concentric walled enclosures with additional shrines, columned halls and sacred pools. The outermost third *prakara* is dominated by the very long corridors for which this temple has long been famous. The existence of a temple on the site from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries is evident not only from fragmentary inscriptions with Pandyan regnal dates, but also five stone shrines on the west side of the third *prakara* that date to this period.<sup>42</sup> But most of the present temple dates to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries at the height of Setupati power, with renovations and additions continuing through the twentieth century. Striking throughout the temple are over 100 life-size standing portrait images attached to columns, now brightly painted but perhaps less so in the past, that line many of the corridors, appearing to greet passing pilgrims as well as deities being carried in procession.

The greatest numbers are located around the third *prakara* corridor that was built between 1740 and the 1770s at the height of Setupati power.<sup>43</sup> Within the western *gopura* are 12 such portrait images lining the aisle. Continuing beyond this group, further large sculptures of various deities, folk figures, ascetics and mythical *yalis* line the route to the western entrance into the second *prakara*. All but one of the male portrait figures stand alone with their hands placed together in greeting. They wear turbans and elaborate jewellery, with punch-daggers (*katar*) at their hips all suggesting their elite status. All but one has the three horizontal lines of ash denoting a Shaiva devotee on his forehead; one has the u-shaped Vaishnava *namam*. The most prominent and elaborately sculpted figure at the centre of the south side of the aisle, with two smaller wives alongside him, is identified as Muttu Ramalinga Setupati (Figure 7.5). He reigned from 1763 to 1794, though temporarily deposed from power from 1772 to 1780. Like many of the eighteenth-century donor figures at Rameshvaram, he wears a turban rather than the early seventeenth-century rounded cloth cap falling to one side favoured by the Madurai Nayakas. Such sartorial change is indicative of the increasing Persianisation or Mughalisation of court dress across southern India in the eighteenth century, evident in the wall paintings at Ramnad palace mentioned above and in contemporary Dutch accounts.<sup>44</sup> One of two further life-sized donor portraits, located alongside 14 images of smaller goddesses in front of the Amman shrine, similarly wears a turban, here decorated with an elaborate *sarpech* or jewelled turban ornament. While many of these donor images are relatively generic in appearance, sartorial details and the sculptors' depiction of more life-like postures, with the weight shifted from one leg to the other, suggest some intention to depict the presence of a series of historic individuals.

The greatest concentrations of these donor figures – 80 of the 107 in the whole temple today – are located on the east side of the temple along the main entrance corridors leading to the inner enclosures of the Ramanatha and Amman shrines (Figure 7.6).<sup>45</sup> Though some donor-images are located in the innermost two temple enclosures, the majority are in the most accessible third *prakara* which was open to all castes.<sup>46</sup> No other south Indian temple has so many portrait sculptures as Rameshvaram, though the similarly-dated seventeenth–eighteenth century Atmanathaswami temple at Avudaiyarkoyil 80 kilometres north of Ramnad is a close contender.<sup>47</sup> With the exception of one group, none of these life-sized images have identifying inscriptions or painted labels but may be dated to around the 1770s when the third *prakara* corridor was completed.<sup>48</sup> They are all attached to columns looking down upon pilgrims entering the temple. But they are on the same level as the



**Figure 7.5** Muttu Ramalinga Setupati (r. 1763–94). West corridor of 3rd *prakara*, Ramanatha temple, Rameshvaram. [▶](#)



**Figure 7.6** Six Setupati images before the Amman *gopuram* on the east side of the 3rd *prakara*, Ramanatha temple, Rameshvaram, c. 1740–70s.

deities when they emerge from their dark, central shrines and carried upon the shoulders of groups of men in procession.

In a dynamic political world, these portraits make a visual claim for the Setupatis to be the pre-eminent patrons, loyal donors and protectors of the temple and its presiding deity over the previous century, despite the temple's status as of pan-Indian, and not just regional, significance. By the later eighteenth century, the fortunes of the Ramnad kingdom had been transformed: in 1730 the state was divided and a separate kingdom of Sivagangai founded and in 1739 the last of the line of their former overlords, the Nayakas of Madurai, had died. Other neighbouring kingdoms continued to have a great influence over their affairs, first the Marathas of Tanjavur then the Nawab of Arcot and his British allies, who had themselves expanded their authority across much of the Tamil region. The group of 12 in the western corridor may be a dynastic lineage from the first, historically-attested ruler Sadaika Tevar Udaiyan Setupati (r. 1605–22), up to Mutturamalinga (r. 1763–72, 1780–94) with some omissions of minor figures such as the short-lived Surya Tevar, murdered in the war with Maratha Tanjavur in 1670. Two unusually large figures measuring well over two metres high alongside the large image of Nandi before the entrance to the innermost *prakara* are identified by modern labels as two of the Setupatis' former overlords, the Madurai Nayakas Vishvanatha (r. 1529–64) and Krishnappa (r. 1564–72).

But the cumulative total of over 80 figures on the east side of the temple cannot be easily correlated with an identifiable genealogy of rulers back to the supposed foundation of the Setupati dynasty in 1605 as subordinates of the Madurai Nayakas, for there are simply too many. The numerous donor images may include several images of the same individual or the same groups of Setupatis. Or they may depict other members of the extended Setupati family and their ministers or advisors, such as the powerful *dalavays* (general) and 'king-makers' in the 1730s to 1760s, Vellaiyan Servaikkarar and Damodaram Pillai.<sup>49</sup> The mass of images all aimed to demonstrate the continuous and conspicuous royal largesse that was needed over several generations in order to secure the Setupatis' royal status.

However, a more compelling explanation is for these figures to be intended to represent a mythical claim to a much older, long-established dynastic precedent stretching further back in time, long before the Madurai Nayakas' installation of Udaiyan Setupati in 1605. In some copper-plate inscriptions issued by the Setupatis around 1670, they are said – like Rama – to have descended from the 'Solar dynasty' (*Suryavamsha*), a long-established Puranic genealogy, though a detailed line of descent is not included in these inscriptions at that time.<sup>50</sup> Manuscripts collected during Colin Mackenzie's surveys in south India between 1790 and 1810 suggest that in the late eighteenth century, shortly after the long corridors of the third *prakara* were constructed with the greatest numbers of portrait images, the Setupatis sought to project a mythological origin for their lineage. The numbers of such mythical antecedents is unclear from such sources. One text traced the Setupatis' descent to the mythical Guha, Rama's ferryman, or a close relative of his, who was installed as the first Setupati by Rama after the defeat of Ravana.<sup>51</sup> The installation of the Setupatis by Rama himself was widely acknowledged in the 1860s and later.<sup>52</sup> However the great number are explained, the minimal sculptural distinction among many of these portrait images enhances the Setupatis' collective lineal succession and the appearance of dynastic cohesion.<sup>53</sup>

The role of portrait sculptures in demonstrating their subjects' rights and privileges in temples took on greater significance at Rameshvaram in the nineteenth century when the Setupati of Ramnad's precedence in the temple was challenged by other, sometimes female, family members as well as by the temple managers. From 1801 the British had either annexed or established indirect control over most of the Tamil-speaking regions of southern India. Ramnad was under British rule from 1795 to 1803 when, under the 'Permanent Settlement', it became a *zamindari* or revenue estate with Muttu Ramalinga Setupati's sister Mangalishvarai Nacchiyar installed as the ruler.



As in earlier centuries, when temple patronage and construction was both an act of religious piety and a political act in pursuit of 'honours', so in the new context of colonial Madras Presidency temples remained the sites for the maintenance or aggrandisement of individual and community status. In Ramnad, this resulted in competition for the title of Setupati among the extended royal family, often pursued through British courts. In the temple at Rameshvaram, royal authority over the temple and its resources, including the land and endowments, was now contested by senior priests, temple managers and – following the passing of the Religious Endowments Act in 1863 – temple management committees. The members of these management committees were often local elites from emergent social classes and mobile corporate groups.

The portrait sculptures seen by visitors in the long corridors at Rameshvaram in the nineteenth century, together with the many inscriptions, demonstrated the longevity of the Setupatis' largesse and their ancestral role in endowing the temple. Some of the portraits received regular temple honours as if the image embodied the presence of the subject. In the 1880s it is recorded that every Friday night, when the god was being carried in procession to the goddess' bedchamber, the images of Tirumalai Setupati and his son Raghunatha at the south entrance to the Amman shrine were honoured with garlands and an offering of betelnut and flowers.<sup>54</sup> A similar practice is attested at several other Tamil temples. From the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, it is reported that in Madurai Tirumala Nayaka himself was honoured with a garland taken from one of the temple's images in the first year of the Pudu Mandapa's consecration, but thereafter the ceremony was transferred to his sculpted image, a practice that continues to this day. At the Rajagopala temple at Mannarkudi, dedicated to the family deity (*kuladevata*) of the Tanjavur Nayakas, portrait images including one of Vijayaraghava (r. 1633–73) continue to play a role in ritual processions of the god who rests beside them whilst the priests recite a text in honour of the temple's royal patrons.<sup>55</sup>

In a long-running dispute with its origins in the disruption to temple affairs of the 1770s and later played out in the colonial law courts between the 1830s and the 1880s, the Setupatis' control of the Rameshvaram temple's administration and of its rich endowments was challenged by a series of priests. The conversion of several royal portraits into ascetics by adding beards, together with the disappearance of some copperplate inscriptions and the forging of new ones that claimed great antiquity, were all used to successfully claim that the Setupatis did not have ancestral privileges. It was instead argued that a great sage (*muni*) named Ramanatha had built



*mandapas* and renovated the temple in the early 1600s at precisely the time when the Setupati lineage had been established by the Madurai Nayakas.<sup>56</sup> A Setupati portrait in the second *prakara* was reported to have been broken in the late 1870s and the pieces thrown away.<sup>57</sup> Until the early 1890s it was the priests and the *pandaram*, a senior priest in control of temple resources, rather than the Setupatis, who were in control of the temple at Rameshvaram. The change in the Setupatis' fortunes in the 1890s and later in the twentieth century was marked by the inclusion (or remodelling) of further life-sized portraits in the temple reaffirming their status as Shiva's greatest devotees, with the deity as the source of their authority and claim to continued royal status into the present. This was at a time when new classes of temple patrons were using the same artistic medium to proclaim their own elite status in colonial Madras Presidency.

### New Royalty and Temple Portraiture in Colonial Madras Presidency

Among the most active new patrons of temples in the late nineteenth century were the Nattukkottai Chettiars (or Nakarattars). They developed an important role in the colonial economy in British India as both successful merchants and as moneylenders, especially in Southeast Asia where they provided funds for the spread of rice agriculture in lower Burma and the expansion of rubber plantations in Malaya. Their successful business activities led not only to local investment in colonial Southeast Asia but to a huge flow of wealth back into their Tamil homeland. Their philanthropic piety was expressed by the collective patronage of the renovations of major Shaiva temples across the Tamil country and by the construction of large temples in their Chettinadu homeland between Pudukkottai and Madurai. The Chettiars' generosity in funding the renovation of a temple was sometimes publicly recorded on an inscribed plaque inserted into the entrance of an inner *gopuram*. At other temples up to life-size portrait images of these new temple donors were inserted into the temple fabric, adopting the same standing pose with hands in *anjali mudra* as all the portrait images discussed above created from the early sixteenth century onwards.

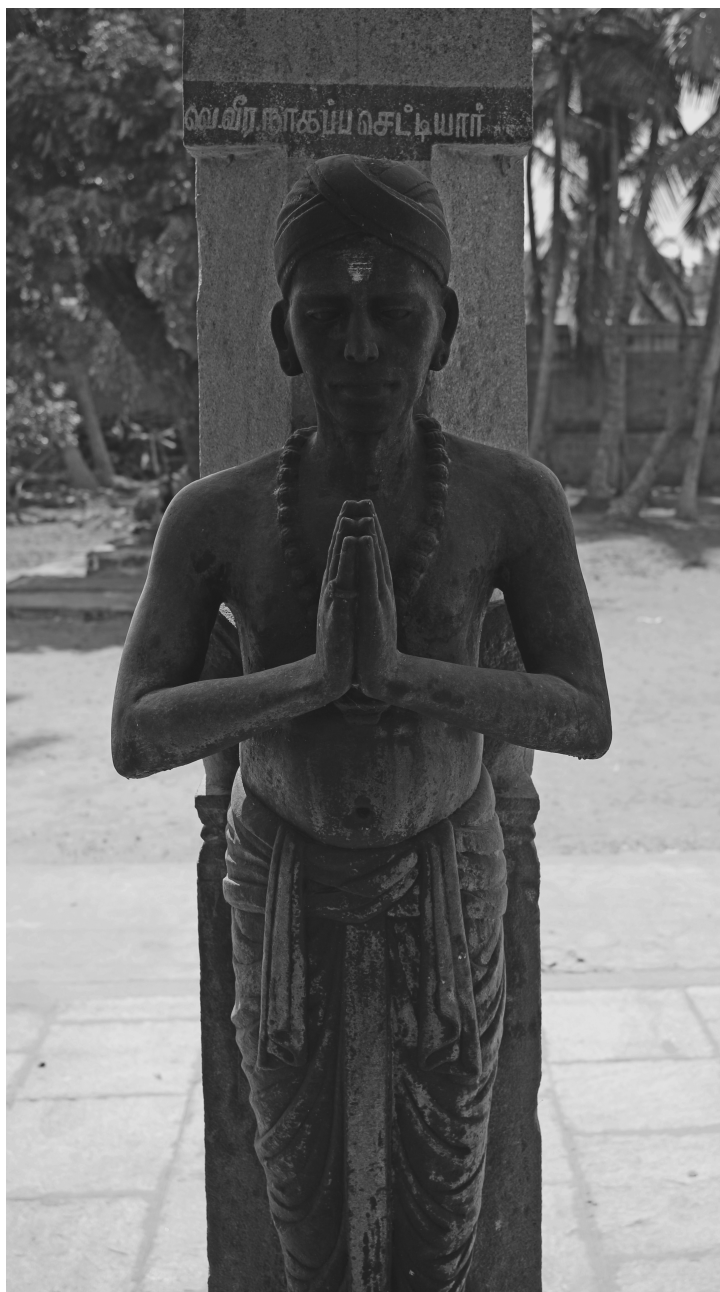
The Valarolinathar temple at Vairavanpatti, one of the Chettiars' nine 'clan' temples in Chettinadu, was built over several decades from the mid-1860s; a reconsecration ceremony in April 1894 marked the conclusion of its construction.<sup>58</sup> If there was an earlier temple on the site, no trace of it remains. The temple is built in what may be characterised as a 'neo-Nayaka' style. The roofed temple enclosure is entered on the east. Columns lining the aisle inside the *gopura* are sculpted into large sculpted images, some 150–170 cm

in height. Alongside the sculpturally-ambitious multi-armed representations of deities, including Virabhadra and the dancing Shiva, are standing figures of the ninth-century poet-saint Manikkavachakar and a turbaned male figure identified by an inscription beneath as Teyanan Chettiar. A further portrait identified by a painted label as Cokkan Chettiar stands in devotion before the Vinayakar shrine in the southwest corner of the temple enclosure. While the iconography remains the same as the portrait images created over the previous 300 years, the identifying inscription with the figure's name is a new feature in the late nineteenth century; very few portrait sculptures have inscriptions before this, the images at Tirumalai being a notable exception.

The renovations of many old temples undertaken under Nattukkottai Chettiar patronage from the 1890s often resulted in the complete erasure and replacement of the ancient stonework.<sup>59</sup> Between 1907 and the *mahakumbabisbekam* (reconsecration) in 1928, the Mayuranatha (Shiva) temple at Mayuram (or Mayavaram) was substantially renovated, the tenth century main shrine and later walls and structures dating up to the thirteenth century at the heart of the temple being almost completely replaced with new material. Included in the new scheme were portrait images of the temple's new patrons. Just before the entrance to the main Mayuranatha shrine, and also before the goddess shrine to Apayampikai in its own *prakara* to the north, are two pairs of standing portrait images, each about 130 cm high, of the temple's two early twentieth century patrons. Tamil inscriptions beneath the pair before the goddess shrine identify them as Al. Viravirappa Chettiar, who is joined by a smaller figure of his wife, and their son Al. Virapetta Chettiar.

If the iconography of these sculpted temple donor portraits seems as consciously archaic as the new or radically renovated temples' design, harking back to the architectural sculpture of the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, then the presence of an identifying inscription and the degree of sculptural naturalism of some portrait figures betray their recent colonial-period date. In the artistic language of the temple and its sculptures, there is a marked adherence to traditions of iconography and iconometry, established through repetitive practice in a master–pupil lineage. Conscious innovation and originality are avoided. Yet, some traditional temple sculptors clearly adopted some aspects of sculptural naturalism when creating images of contemporary, early twentieth-century temple patrons. This is usually in marked contrast to the conservative depiction of the deities alongside.

The Darukavaneshvara at Tirupparaitturai 11 miles west of Trichy on the south bank of the river Kaveri illustrates this sculptural change. When the local collector heard of the imminent destruction of the Chola-period temple in August 1903 he informed the government in Madras which quickly



**Figure 7.7** Ve. Vir. Nagappa Chettiar. Darukavaneshvara temple, Tirupparaiturai, c. 1910–40.

despatched the epigraphist V. Venkkaya to record the numerous inscriptions dating as early as the ninth century in the reign of the Chola monarch Aditya (r. 871–907).<sup>60</sup> In the early decades of the twentieth century, which included the celebration of a *mahakumbabishekam* in 1910 and another in 1940, the tenth-century temple was wholly replaced with a new central shrine and auxiliary structures. Between the two new *gopurams* of the temple is an open *mandapa* around the image of Nandi, the sacrificial altar (*balipitha*) and flagpole (*dhvajastambha*). Four of the columns have just under life-size images all identified in Tamil as the temple's patron, Ve. Vir. Nagappa Chettiar of Kanadukattan (Figure 7.7), in the company of three of the Shaiva poet-saints, Appar, Manikkavachakar and Sambandar, all of whom are believed to have visited the sacred site more than a millennium earlier. The often stiff formality of other portraits is reduced in favour of a naturalistic rendering of the pious Chettiar patron, wearing a *veshti* and necklace of sacred *rudraksba* seeds as a devout Shaiva devotee, alongside images of three of Tamil Shaivism's most important religious figures.

Little is known about the artists and craftsmen who built this and other new temples in the early twentieth century, and the agency by which European naturalism was selectively adopted by some. Contrary to Partha Mitter's view that Victorian academic naturalism ousted earlier traditions of Indian art in colonial India with ease, it is evident that this was far from the case in South India.<sup>61</sup> Writing in response to an enquiry about the state of modern architecture in India, the government archaeologist in Madras Alexander Rea described in 1912 the work resulting from the many temple renovations conducted by the Chettiars across southern India and remarked upon the very high order of the workmanship.<sup>62</sup> The art world of the Tamil temple would seem to be completely separate from the colonial art environment that embraced the Government School of Fine Art, training in academic naturalism and the paintings on display at the Madras Fine Arts exhibition. But there was clearly some interaction and exchange between the two art worlds by the early twentieth century, as the naturalism of some Tamil temple portraiture and other architectural ornament indicates.

As in earlier centuries, temples continued to be of immense local importance: they were often very wealthy, owning large areas of land, were important local employers and money-lenders, were central to the social and cultural life of a town, and were the arbiters of social status in a locality. As Christopher Baker has written of this period between 1880 and 1920, 'Temples were both makers and breakers of social status'. For the increasingly wealthy Nattukkottai Chettiars, temples were the locations where their status was enhanced so that by the 1930s they had 'a reputation for sanctity and a



Figure 7.8 Baskar Setupati, Rameshvaram, c. 1970.



ritual status almost as impressive as their bank balances'.<sup>63</sup> As both Tamil temple sculpture and the painted photographs that became popular in this period demonstrate, merchants were the new royalty in colonial Madras Presidency.<sup>64</sup> The Chettiars were not the only group conspicuously acting as the patrons of new temples. The Nadar community, formerly known as the Shanars, built many new temples around 1900 in their home towns south of Madurai at Aruppukkottai and Virudnagar, seeking to demonstrate that they were not lower caste but the direct descendants of the Pandya and Nayaka kings. Portrait images standing in permanent devotion to the resident deity, as seen at the Amutalingeshvara temple at Aruppukkottai built at the beginning of the twentieth century, constituted a conspicuous display of philanthropy and religious duty, which brought both an aura of virtue and enhanced social status to their patrons.<sup>65</sup>

### Conclusion

In the years leading up to the reconsecration of the Ramanatha temple in Rameshvaram in 1974, a new portrait image was added to the many already located within the corridors of this great temple (Figure 7.8). The standing image of Baskara Setupati (r. 1889–1903) stands within a modest extension to the main gateway to the Ramanatha shrine on the east side through which the great numbers of pilgrims enter the whole temple. He is depicted in a similar fashion to the many sixteenth to eighteenth century examples of Tamil portrait sculpture discussed above, bare-chested and with his hands in *anjali* *mudra* (though he has no accompanying wife). In contrast to the images of his Setupati predecessors elsewhere in the temple, a Tamil inscription clearly identifies him. After a century of challenges to their pre-eminence by both the colonial state and Rameshvaram's temple priests, Baskara's installation as Setupati in a grand ceremony in 1889 had led to a short-lived attempt to reclaim the Setupati's royal status in pre-colonial terms. Baskara was appointed temple manager by the District Court in the 1890s, and his magnificent celebration of Navaratri in 1892 reaffirmed the source of his authority to be the Setupatis' tutelary deity Rajarajeshwari and not the British imperial system.<sup>66</sup> In a studio photograph dated around 1900, Baskara is presented in his role as a 'gentleman' *zamindar* within British India. He sits on a chair looking at the viewer, dressed in buttoned jacket and shiny shoes, his hand on a sword resting against his leg in a manner that enabled him to participate in the formalities of British colonial power.<sup>67</sup> Baskara's brief reign led to a revival in the status of the Setupati lineage in Rameshvaram. But his premature death in 1903 resulted in further



turbulence in temple affairs, the new Chettiar manager seeking to radically renovate the temple with substantial funds donated by other members of the wealthy Nattukkottai Chettiar community, in a direct challenge to the authority of the Setupati's family claims. Some suspected that the extensive renovation of the temple planned to include the removal of the numerous Setupati portrait images and the erasure of any remaining inscriptions testifying to their past patronage and largesse, as had been attempted earlier in the mid-nineteenth century. The dispute rumbled on for many years, with numerous petitions to the Government of Madras and appeals from the wider Hindu community, the result of which was that only some of the proposed renovations were completed in this period.<sup>68</sup> In 1911 a new management committee of five members was constituted with three positions limited to five-year terms and two to be hereditary, one of which would be the current Setupati and the other a member of the male line of the late Al. Ar. Ramasamy Chettiar of Devakottai who had led the recent renovations.<sup>69</sup> Sixty years later during the further renovations between 1969 and the *mahakumbabishekam* in 1974, Baskara's celebrated reign at the turn of the nineteenth century was commemorated with a new memorial portrait of him at the main entrance.<sup>70</sup> Together these new portraits reaffirmed the male rights of succession over many female contenders in the succession disputes of the nineteenth century, and the pre-eminence of Setupati patronage over 300 years to this great pan-Indian pilgrimage temple.<sup>71</sup>

The life-size sculpted portraiture found within many temples across the Tamil region of South India represent a shared visual culture of elite representation across four centuries from its emergence around 1500 through to the twentieth century. Portraiture in the Tamil temple was less concerned with representing the individual than it was with serving as the means to claim, define and display social and political status. These portraits do not usually attempt to represent the physical appearance of their subjects, though those of Tirumalai Nayaka and some of the Chettiar patrons approach this, but were instead actively involved in the construction of the subject's public royal identity. As Sheila Dillon has commented in discussing largely unidentified ancient Greek sculptures, 'portraits are more performative than descriptive; they actively create a physical reality'.<sup>72</sup> The examples discussed demonstrate the continuity of form in the depiction of prominent temple donors, standing with their hands held in greeting and devotion before them. The audiences for these portraits are the many devotees coming to these temples in a period of expanding trade, migration and pilgrimage, and also the temples' deities emerging from the dark confines of their temple homes during the periodic festival processions that are a central element of

Tamil temple ritual. Portraiture was the means to establish the permanent presence of a temple donor in a conspicuous display of his piety and devotion to the deity. Such imagery was also used to establish a lineage and to demonstrate continuity with and claim legitimacy from the past, for each of the examples draws upon its predecessor not only in terms of its visual iconography but in its political associations as well.

### Notes

1. Vijayaraghavacharya, V. *Epigraphical Glossary on Tirupati Devasthanam Inscriptions*. Madras: Tirumalai-Tirupati Devasthanams Press, 1938, 249–50 and Vijayaraghavacharya, V., ed. *Inscriptions of Krishnaraya's Time. From 1509 AD to 1531 AD, Tirumalai-Tirupati Devasthanam Epigraphical Series, vol. 3*. Madras: Sri Mahant's Devasthanam Press, 1935, nos. 80–81. This king is named Krishna or Krishnadeva in contemporary and modern secondary sources, with the addition of his title *-raya* (king) as a suffix.
2. Wagoner, Phillip B. *Tidings of the King: A Translation and Ethnohistorical Analysis of the Rayavacakamu*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993, 157. The 'copper' image in Telugu is *tāmbṛāna-pratibimbamu* (216).
3. On the development of Tirupati/Tirumalai and its temples see Stein, Burton. 'The Economic Function of a Mediaeval South Indian Temple.' *Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 19 (1960), 163–76 and Viraraghavacharya, T.K.T. *A History of Tirupati*. 2nd ed. 3 vols. Tirupati: Tirumalai Tirupati Devasthanam Religious Publications, 1977. Vijayanagara patronage of the Varadaraja temple at Kanchipuram and the Ranganatha temple at Srirangam, especially by the great Tuluva emperors Krishnadeva and Achyutadeva, is discussed in Raman, K. V. *Sri Varadarajaswami Temple – Kanchi*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1975 and Hari Rao, V. N. *The Srirangam Temple: Art and Architecture*. Tirupati: Sri Venkateswara University, 1967. Krishnadeva visited both temples in 1516.
4. Vijayaraghavacharya, V., ed., *Inscriptions of Krishnaraya's Time. From 1509 AD to 1531 AD. Tirumalai-Tirupati Devasthanam Epigraphical Series vol. III* Madras: Sri Mahant's Devasthanam Press, 1935 and V. Vijayaraghavacharya, *Epigraphical Glossary on Tirupati Devasthanam Inscriptions*. Madras: Tirumalai-Tirupati Devasthanams Press, 1938, 249–50.
5. Only a single inscription in Telugu dated c. 1360 and one in Kannada dated c. 1430 have been recorded prior to Krishnadeva's reign. Subrahmanya Sastry, Sadhu, ed. *Report on the Inscriptions of the Devasthanam Collection with Illustrations*. Madras: Tirupati Sri Mahant's Press, 1930, 3.
6. On Krishnadeva's patronage of temples, such as Tirupati, and other religious institutions in order to integrate conquered areas and link them culturally to the state, see Stoker, Valerie. *Polemics and Patronage in the City of Victory: Vyāsātīrtha, Hindu Sectarianism, and the Sixteenth-Century Vijayanagara Court*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016. She details how Krishnadeva and the Vijayanagara court aimed to establish a transregional and trans-sectarian Vaishnavism that was of high political utility. This 'big tent Vaishnavism' manifested primarily in temples in the multilingual zone at the empire's core, where Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada intersected, enabled the court to showcase its generous temple patronage, which was deeply entangled with its military activities, to a variety of publics. She argues that these Vaishnava temples created through

- royal patronage, both expanded Vijayanagara outreach and articulated a distinctive Vijayanagara cosmopolitanism (132–33).
7. Illustrated in Chapter 1 (Vincent Lefèvre) in this volume.
  8. Sastry, P.V. Parabrahma, ed. *Inscriptions of the Vijayanagara Rulers. Volume 4. Telugu Inscriptions (1351 AD–1665 AD)*. New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 2009, lxxiii, 227.
  9. The evidence for when these images were deposited in the temple comes not from the inscriptions recording his visits and his gifts of gold and ornaments for the god, but from a Telugu account of Krishnadeva's reign, the *Rayavacakamu*. Phillip Wagoner has convincingly argued that the *Rayavacakamu* was not written at the time of the events it narrates in the early sixteenth century but around 1600 and at the court in Madurai, long after the sack of Vijayanagara in 1565 that led to the gradual disintegration of the great empire: see Wagoner, *Tidings of the King*, 3–12. Though the metal portrait images of Krishnadeva and his two wives are probably contemporary with their visit, as has been assumed by most scholars to date, they may instead date to later in the sixteenth century given the silence of the inscriptions in mentioning such significant offerings. By 1600 portrait sculptures were much more widespread, as discussed below, and many examples are located within the Madurai Nayaka realm.
  10. Vijayaraghavacharya, *Epigraphical Glossary*, 232, 301.
  11. Many of the bronze images made in the tenth to twelfth centuries in the Tamil region measure 70–100 cm in height. The largest known complete Indian bronze sculpture is the sixth–seventh century standing Buddha found at Sultanganj in Bihar measuring 223 cm in height. This was found in 1861 and donated to Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in 1864.
  12. Metal images of Rajaraja, his consort and parents were donated to the Rajarajeshvara temple at Tanjavur in the early eleventh century according to an inscription, all comparable in size to the numerous images of deities donated to the temple on the same occasion. See Dehejia, Vidya, ed., *The Sensuous and the Sacred: Chola bronzes from South India*. New York, Seattle and London: American Federation of Arts and University of Washington Press, 2002, 83–85. Stone images from Darasuram, perhaps of Rajaraja II (r. 1146–72) and a queen, and an unusual metal image from Kalahasti, identified as Kulottunga III (r. 1178–1218), suggest the occasional production of such smaller images or donor portraits. See Chapter 1 in this volume.
  13. On the changing nature of kingship in early modern south India see Shulman, David Dean. *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985 and Narayana Rao, Velcheru, David Dean Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nayaka Period Tamil Nadu*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992.
  14. *The story of Manu by Allasāni Peddana*, translation and commentary by Narayana Rao, Velcheru & David Dean Shulman, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015, 27, 145; Shulman, *The King and the Clown*, 367; Narayana Rao, Velcheru. 'Kings, Gods and Poets: Ideologies of Patronage in Medieval Andhra'. In *The Powers of Art: Patronage in Indian Culture*, edited by Barbara Stoler Miller. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992, 142–59.
  15. For a plan of this temple with the location of the portraits indicated see Branfoot, Crispin. *Gods on the Move: Architecture and Ritual in the South Indian Temple*. London: Society for South Asian Studies, 2007, 17.
  16. It has also been suggested that the stone king and queen are Venkatapatideva's parents, Tirumalaraya and Vengalamba. See *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India for 1911–12*. Calcutta: Government of India, 1915, 189–93.

17. However, there was little distinction between the Vadakalai ('northern') and Tenkalai ('southern') branches of Srivaishnavism – and perhaps their differing forehead-marks – until later in the seventeenth century. See Raman, Srilata. *Self-Surrender (Prapatti) to God in Shrivaisnavism: Tamil Cats and Sanskrit Monkeys*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2007, 7–8.
18. Subrahmanya Sastry, *Report on the Inscriptions*, 220–27 and Vijayaraghavacharya, V. and Narayan, G. A. eds. *Inscriptions of Achyutaraya's time. From 1530 A.D. to 1542 A.D. Tirumalai-Tirupati Devasthanam Epigraphical Series vol. IV*. Madras: Tirumalai Tirupati Devasthanams Press, 1936, nos. 8–10, 16–17, 54–55, 58, 123.
19. Vijayaraghavacharya and Narayan, eds. *Inscriptions of Achyutaraya's time*, no. 29.
20. On Srivaishnavism at the capital, see Verghese, Anila. *Religious Traditions at Vijayanagara as Revealed Through Its Monuments*. New Delhi: Manohar and American Institute of Indian Studies, 1995, 69–84 and Rao, Ajay K. *Re-Figuring the Ramāyana as Theology: A History of Reception in Premodern India*. RoutledgeCurzon Hindu Studies Series. Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2015.
21. Vijayaraghavacharya, *Epigraphical Glossary*, 278.
22. Viraraghavacharya, *History of Tirupati* vol. 2, 581, 588; Mears, Barbara. 'Symbols of Coins of the Vijayanagara Empire'. *South Asian Studies* 24, no. 1 (2008), 77–83.
23. Verghese, *Religious Traditions at Vijayanagara*, 19.
24. A greater volume of donations is recorded from the Govindaraja temple at the base of the hill in Tirupati in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth century.
25. Though there is no certainty that these inscriptions are contemporary with the sculptures' creation, the Government Epigraphist V. Venkayya, who was the first to study and photograph these images in February–March 1903, judged the character of the inscriptions to be sixteenth century. *Annual Report on Epigraphy for 1903–4*, Government of Madras, Public, G.O. 678, 12th August 1904, 6.
26. Jenkins, Marianna. *The State Portrait: Its Origins and Evolution*. New York: College Art Association of America, 1947, 1. Dehejia's recent discussion of the ornamented and idealised male body includes a discussion of royal portraits in pre-modern India but omits discussion of the far more numerous and larger Nayaka examples: Dehejia, Vidya. *The Body Adorned: Dissolving Boundaries between Sacred and Profane in India's art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.
27. For an excellent recent assessment of Madurai's site-myths in the early seventeenth century see Fisher, Elaine M. *Hindu Pluralism: Religion and the Public Sphere in Early Modern South India*. South Asia across the Disciplines. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017, 137–82.
28. Narayana Rao et al. *Symbols of Substance*, 67.
29. Hurpré, Jean-Francois. 'The Royal Jewels of Tirumalai Nayak of Madurai (1623–1659).' In *The Jewels of India*, edited by Susan Stronge. Bombay: Marg, 1995, 63–80.
30. For the complications of accurately identifying all the ten rulers of Madurai in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries see Branfoot, Crispin. 'Dynastic Genealogies, Portraiture and the Place of the Past in Early Modern South India.' *Artibus Asiae* 72.2 (2012), 323–76.
31. Before 1939, no untouchables (*Dalits*) or Nadars were permitted into the Minakshi-Sundareshvara temple and access to the innermost shrines was perhaps limited to Brahmans. Standing outside the main walls of the temple, the Pudu Mandapa was accessible to all communities. On devotees' access to south Indian temples, see Fuller, C. J. *Servants of the Goddess: The Priests of a South Indian Temple*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 41–42.

32. On these portraits see Branfoot. *Gods on the Move*, ch.7 and Venkatesan, Archana and Crispin Branfoot. *In Andal's Garden: art, ornament and devotion in Srivilliputtur*. Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2015.
33. For examples of Nayaka-period ivories, see Michell, George. *Architecture and Art of Southern India: Vijayanagara and the successor states*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 212–15.
34. Stein, Burton. 'Mahanavami: Mediaeval and Modern Kingly Ritual in South India.' In *Essays in Gupta Culture*, edited by Bardwell L. Smith. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983, 67–90, 78. On the earlier history of Ramnad, see Kadhivel, S. *History of the Maravas, 1700–1802*. Madurai: Madurai Publishing House, 1977 and Howes, Jennifer. *The Courts of Precolonial India: Material Culture and Kingship*. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003.
35. Many aspects of these paintings have been addressed in previous studies but they await full critical documentation and analysis. Nagaswamy, R. 'Mughal Cultural Influence in the Setupati Murals in the Ramalinga Vilasam at Ramnad.' In *Facets of Indian Art*, edited by Robert Skelton, Andrew Topsfield, Susan Stronge and Rosemary Crill. London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1986, 203–10; Howes, *The Courts of Precolonial India*, 90–126; Verghese, Anila. 'King and Courtly Life as Depicted in the Murals in Ramalinga Vilasam, Ramanathapuram'. In *Art, Icon and Architecture in South Asia: Essays in Honour of Dr. Devangana Desai*, edited by Anila Verghese and Anna L. Dallapiccola. New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2 vols. 2015, vol. 2, 473–89.
36. On the Dutch presence at the Setupati court and the subtle distinctions of court dress in this period and depicted in the Ramnad paintings, see Bes, Lennart. 'Sultan among Dutchmen? Royal Dress at Court Audiences in South India, as Portrayed in Local Works of Art and Dutch Embassy Reports, Seventeenth–eighteenth Centuries'. *Modern Asian Studies* 50, no. 6 (2016), 1792–845.
37. Seastrand, Anna L. *Praise, Politics, and Language: South Indian Murals, 1500–1800*. PhD thesis, Columbia University, 2013, 194–95.
38. For an illustration see Branfoot, Crispin. 'Minaksi's Wedding, Painting the Sacred Marriage in Early Modern Madurai.' In *Indian Painting: The Lesser Known Traditions*, edited by Anna L. Dallapiccola. Delhi: Niyogi Publications, 2011, 172–89.
39. The Setupatis' performance of the *hiranyagarbha* ceremony, one of the 16 major gift-giving ceremonies (*mahadana*) of medieval kingship, dates to at least 1659 according to a copper-plate inscription. See Breckenridge, Carol Appadurai. 'From Protector to Litigant – Changing Relations between Hindu Temples and the Raja of Ramnad.' In *South Indian Temples: An Analytical Reconsideration*, edited by Burton Stein. Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978, 75–106, 91.
40. Narayana Rao et al., *Symbols of Substance*, 60, 66–67.
41. Aitken, Molly Emma. *The intelligence of tradition in Rajput court painting*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010, 119–25 and Khera, Dipti. 'Jagvilasa: Picturing Worlds of Pleasure and Power in 18th-Century Udaipur Painting'. In *A Magic World: New Visions of Indian Painting*, edited by Molly Emma Aitken, 74–87. Mumbai, India: Marg Publications, 2016.
42. For the earliest inscriptions see Mahalingam, T.V. *A Topographical List of Inscriptions in the Tamil Nadu and Kerala States*. 9 vols. New Delhi: Indian Council for Historical Research and S. Chand & Company, 1985–95; vol. 6, 236–37. Sethuraman, G. 'Chola shrines in the Rameswaram temple complex' in *Tamilnadu: an archaeological perspective*, edited by K. Damodaran. Chennai: Department of Archaeology, 1999, 73–80.

43. Burgess, James, and S. M. Natesa Sastri. *Tamil and Sanskrit Inscriptions with Some Notes on Village Antiquities in the South of the Madras Presidency*. Archaeological Survey of Southern India, Vol. IV. Madras: Government Press, 1886, 57.
44. Bes, 'Sultan among Dutchmen?'
45. The number of donor-portraits identified in the temple today in various locations is tantalisingly close to 108, a number of rich numerological significance in Indian culture.
46. Burgess, James. 'The Ritual of Ramesvaram.' *Indian Antiquary* vol. 12 (1883), 315.
47. The identities of the portrait-images at Avudaiyarkoil are similarly difficult to determine but include the eighteenth-century Tondaiman rulers of nearby Arantangi as well as some of the Setupatis from Ramnad. Some of the Setupati images were reportedly demolished during a renovation in the 1880s and replaced with new images of the Chettiar renovator and a contemporary priest: see 'Temple at Ramesvaram', Government of Madras, Public, G.O. 359, 9th May 1906.
48. Within the *mandapa* built beyond the outermost enclosure wall on the east side and on axis with the Amman shrine are 22 images all with painted labels identifying them as Setupatis from Udayan Setupati (r. 1604–21) to Shanmuka Rajeshvara born in 1909 and installed as Setupati in 1929. The *mandapa* may date to the later eighteenth century and is indicated on a plan of the temple dated around 1900, but the labels may have been added – and images of the most recent Setupatis remodelled in contemporary dress – around 1930. In 1911 the Setupatis were assured a hereditary position on the five-member executive committee of the temple. The plan is published in James Fergusson, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, rev. and with additions by James Burgess and R. Phené Spiers. London: John Murray, 1910, 381.
49. Burgess remarks that images of Vijaya Raghunatha Setupati appear in three places, for example, together with images of the Setupatis' *mantris*: Burgess, 'The Ritual of Ramesvaram', 316.
50. Burgess and Sastri, *Tamil and Sanskrit Inscriptions*, 70–77. On Puranic genealogies see Casparis, J.G. de. 'Inscriptions and South Asian Dynastic Traditions'. In *Tradition and Politics in South Asia*, edited by R.J. Moore, 103–27. Delhi: Vikas, 1979 and Ali, Daud. 'Royal Eulogy as World History: Rethinking Copper-Plate Inscriptions in Cola India'. In *Querying the Medieval: Texts and the History of Practices in South Asia*, edited by Ronald Inden, Jonathan Walters, and Daud Ali, 165–229. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
51. This is suggested by a manuscript in the Mackenzie collection, 'A general history of the kings of Rama Naad or the Satoo-Putty Samastanum', composed around the late eighteenth century, perhaps in or near Madurai (BL Mss Eur Mack Gen, no. 4, part 8: ff. 171–201). I am indebted to Lennart Bes for this information and indeed for sharing his extensive researches on Setupati genealogies and history.
52. Nelson, J. H. *The Madura Country: A Manual*. Madras: Madras Government, 1868, 109–14.
53. On the formal sameness of portraits in Rajasthani court paintings, Molly Emma Aitken writes: 'If, in the groups of portraits that were amassed in collections and albums, stylistic differences generated an appearance of *cohesion within* dynasties and courts, they also would have produced a *visible distinction* between dynasties and courts' (italics in original). Aitken. *The intelligence of tradition in Rajput court painting*, 143.
54. Burgess. 'The Ritual of Ramesvaram', 316.
55. Taylor, William, trans. *Oriental Historical Manuscripts in the Tamil Language*. 2 vols. Madras: Charles Josiah Taylor, 1835, vol. 2, 155. Shulman, David, and Velcheru Narayana Rao. 'Marriage Broker for the Gods: The Tanjavur Nayakas and the Mannarkuti Temple'. In *The Sacred Centre as the Focus of Political Interest*, edited by Hans Bakker, 179–203. Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1992, 181.



56. On this dispute see 'Rajah Muttu Ramalinga Setupati, Zemindar of Ramnad, vs. Periyannayagum Pillai' in *The Law Reports. Indian Appeals: being cases in the Privy Council on appeal from the East Indies*. Vol. 1 1873–74. London (1874), 209–41; Burgess, *Tamil and Sanskrit Inscriptions*, 58–59; Burgess, 'The Ritual of Ramesvaram'; and Price, Pamela G. *Kingship and Political Practice in Colonial India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 116–27.
57. Rea, Alexander in 'Temple at Ramesvaram', Government of Madras, Public, G.O. 643, 1<sup>st</sup> August 1904.
58. Cantiramurti, M. *Vayiravan Koyil*. Chennai: Manivacakar Patippakam, 1996, 36.
59. Branfoot, Crispin. 'Remaking the Past: Tamil Sacred Landscape and Temple Renovations.' *Bulletin of SOAS* 76.1 (2013), 21–47.
60. 'Temple at Tiruppallaturai'[sic], Government of Madras, Public, G.O. 933, 17<sup>th</sup> October 1903. The inscriptions recorded on the temple before its demolition are listed in the *Annual Report for Epigraphy for 1903–4*, G.O. 678 12<sup>th</sup> August 1904, 26–27, nos. 244–90 of 1903.
61. Mitter, Partha. *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850–1922*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 7.
62. 'Modern Indian Architecture', Government of Madras, Public, G.O. 939–40, 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1912.
63. Baker, C.J. 'Temples and Political Development.' In *South India: Political Institutions and Political Change, 1880–1940*, edited by C.J. Baker and D.A. Washbrook. Delhi: Macmillan, 1975, 72.
64. Dewan, Deepali, and Olga Zotova. *Embellished Reality: Indian Painted Photographs*. Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum Press, 2012, 29.
65. Washbrook, D.A. *The Emergence of Provincial Politics: The Madras Presidency, 1870–1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, 108; Parker, Samuel K. 'Shapes of Identity and Time: A "Royal" Temple in Contemporary South India'. In *Traditional Arts of South Asia: Continuity in Contemporary Practice and Patronage*, edited by Crispin Branfoot. London: Saffron Press, 2015, 168–93.
66. Breckenridge, Carol Appadurai. 'From Protector to Litigant – Changing Relations between Hindu Temples and the Raja of Ramnad.' In *South Indian Temples: An Analytical Reconsideration*, edited by Burton Stein. Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978, 75–106.
67. On display in the Ramalinga Vilasam Museum in Ramnad. See the cover of Price, *Kingship and Political Practice in Colonial India*; Aitken, *The Intelligence of Tradition*, 149.
68. 'Correspondence regarding preservation of the temple of Rameswaram in the Madras Presidency.' File no. 89, serial nos. 1–6, Office of the Director General of Archaeology in India, 1907 (Archaeology), New Delhi.
69. Vanamamalai Pillai, N. *Temples of the Setu and Rameswaram*. Delhi: Kunj, 1982 (originally published 1929), 77.
70. The circumstances under which Baskar's image was erected in the temple between 1969 and 1974 remain to be investigated, given the contemporary rise of Tamil nationalist politics in Madras State (renamed Tamilnadu in 1969) and Indira Gandhi's constitutional amendment in 1971 that stripped the maharajas, the former rulers of India, of the titles, privy purses and regal privileges granted after independence.
71. A life-size portrait of Ramanatha Setupati, who died in 1979, was installed in the Mangalanatha temple at Uttarakosamangai shortly after; alongside are portraits of four of his predecessors just before the entrance into the main Shiva shrine.
72. Dillon, Sheila. *Ancient Greek Portrait Sculpture: Contexts, Subjects, and Styles*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 99.

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